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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3331

INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHWL/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY

RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000847

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2024

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SUBJECT: 240 RADIO STATIONS THREATENED WITH CLOSURE

REF: CARACAS 831 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FFERNANDEZ, REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Diosdado Cabello, a top aide to President Hugo Chavez, announced July 4 the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) would potentially revoke the licenses of 240 radio stations across the country.

Citing incomplete tax payments and improper regulatory filings as reasons for canceling the licenses, Cabello criticized the control of radio stations by "elite families" and implied that tax fines were likely to be imposed in the days ahead. As Chavez continues to consolidate his control of the Government, independent or critical media in Venezuela continues to be shuttered via bureaucratic regulation, technical harassment, and financial penalties designed to silence dissent in the country. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Minister of Public Works and Housing, Diosdado Cabello, announced over the holiday weekend that the GBRV would revoke the licenses of 154 FM radio stations and 86 AM radio stations that were not in compliance with the national telecommunications commission's, (CONATEL's) May 29 demand for "updated information." Radio station license holders were given 15 days in June to submit "updated information" to the government, including original licenses, bureaucratic records, and many other documents from all television and radio stations. Owners widely opined throughout the month of June that the purpose of this process was to intimidate, and ultimately close, any remaining opposition leaning radio stations across the country. (Reftel) Technically, radio stations have five remaining days to operate freely, however Cabello has already stated that "administrative proceedings" against the stations could involve the actual seizure of broadcasting equipment at any time.

¶3. (SBU) Pro-Government paper Diario VEA reported on July 5 that out of 285 stations whose records were reviewed, 20% of AM radio stations, 23% of FM radio stations, and 25% of TV stations across the country were not in compliance with the tax code, implying that future fines are likely to be imposed on many of the same stations in the weeks ahead.

Pro-Government media further reported that according to Cabello only 51% of TV stations have correctly paid their taxes. International media reported over the weekend on Cabello's criticism of the control of radio stations exercised by elite families. Justifying the revocations Cabello declared "a need to democratize spectrum use."

¶4. (C) Comment: A June 18 Supreme Court ruling reaffirmed CONATEL's full authority over radio, television and phone companies. The potential revocation of so many radio licenses at the same time would place the future of these companies entirely in the hands of the highly politicized judicial system. While the GBRV has clearly had its sights set on

closing opposition oriented TV station Globovision for many months, the simultaneous revocation of 240 radio station licenses has been less abrupt and unapologetically political than the 2007 closure of RCTV. The technical and bureaucratic approach the GBRV is employing in the latest attack on the media, may prove its most effective move yet in silencing dissent throughout the country.

DUDDY